THE LAST THROW.

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM,

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THERE was a life-size fresco by Romano upon the wall of the alcove; the alcove supposedly shut off by heavy curtains, yet which by a freak of position was visible to one of the two gentlemen seated in the main room beyond. The frescoed portrait of a dice player, not dim and faded as now, but glowing with vivid life and color; where keen, black eyes laughed malignly down at the poised tesseræ, where the painted cup quivered in the painted hand raised for the cast, and the hard, handsome mouth smiled in anticipated victory.

It was not a portrait readily forgotten; and in the noon sunlight there sat opposite the man who was its original, looking up at the imaged face with the same malign amusement. The gentleman in the main room moved slightly to see more clearly through the parted draperies.

He fancied himself unseen, this gorgeous young noble clad in scarlet silks and velvets, who leaned back in his chair so nonchalantly and listened to the old man who was speaking. He fancied the alcove sheltered him, and he was eavesdropping deliberately and enjoying it. Yet, his black head with its thick, short curls tilted against the

cushions, his jeweled fingers idly tapping the arm of the chair, he conveyed the impression that he would have remained perfectly undisturbed if he had suddenly found himself discovered. As indeed the watcher knew he would be, knowing him.

"And it was moonlight," went on the strong, grim voice of the old man who was seated with his back to the alcove. "The gardens were bright as morning, and each shadow showed black as ebony on the sward. So we went, I and a dozen of the armed servants, and found him easily—under Isaura's balcony. She screamed, crouching down behind the balustrade; he turned around to meet us. I give you the word of an Italian noble, Lelio, that he looked a boy, a child."

"Don Paolo is but nineteen, *signore*," answered Lelio, his gaze still on the curtains.

There are voices which would be a language of pure sound in themselves, were not an intelligible syllable spoken. Of such was this one; rich, golden-clear, and very grave. The listener in the alcove turned his face that way.

"Nineteen, and Isaura seventeen, yes. Yet they knew what they risked," was the quick retort. "They knew, Lelio, as they looked at me.

"'*Signore*,' I said to him, when I could speak for wrath, 'I do not see your features well in the night, but it is plain that you are some thief who has entered my garden and frightened my niece; for which my men shall presently hang you and there will be an end of this matter.'

"'Count,' he answered me, 'I am Paolo de Cariano, grandson of the duke of this city and province of Belfiore; as I think you know.'

"'I should be sorry to know that,' I said, 'for that would mean my niece must end her days in a convent, while I must bid you draw that sword you wear and either myself kill you or send for my son Guido to kill you for this disgrace to our house. I am not too old for just combat.'

"'*Signore Conte*, there is no disgrace!' he cried like a madman. '*Signore Conte*, your niece is an angel of light who knew nothing of my coming!'

"'That may be. But she is found here with you, and that is disgrace enough for a gentlewoman who should speak alone with no man,' I said; and Isaura sobbed up there, hiding her face. For a space he stared at me, then bowed, hand on heart:

"'I see we are confused, count. I have the honor to ask the hand of Donna Isaura of you, to-night, as I meant my grandfather to do for me to-morrow.'"

Lelio pushed the fair hair off his forehead, and turned his head to the warm, flower-scented breeze drifting through the open windows.

"He could do no more, *signore*," he suggested.

"No. Nor could I do less than take the amend.

"'I give thanks for the courtesy you offer us, Don Paolo,' I told him, urgently enough, perhaps. 'My niece is betrothed to her cousin Don Lelio del'-Isoletto; and if he still cares to have her, he shall have her. The duke may rule Belfiore, but in my house he does *not* rule. I will write of this to Don Lelio and abide his decision.'

"So I marshaled him out of the villa, while the girl rose and fled into her room. The next day I wrote to you, at Seville."

"They all wrote," supplemented Lelio.

"They all—— Don Paolo? Isaura?"

"Yes, and Guido."

The count straightened in his chair; his expression fugitively resembling that of the dice player in the alcove fresco, with its capacity for hardness fully developed.

"You answered, how?" he demanded.

"How did I answer you, *signore*?"

"You answered, Lelio, that in Isaura you had every faith; that you would esteem above all honors the honor of calling her your wife. But since she no longer desired that, you begged me to give her in marriage to the man she loved, and to let the old bitterness

between the families die out. So you answered me."

"So I answered them. At her betrothal to me she was a child, now she is a woman. It is as well, this change, for——"

The pause was long, many insurgent emotions rising in revolt against the strong self-control that would tolerate no less than faultless calm. So long that the count finally recalled the speaker:

"For, Lelio?"

"For, *signore,* I bear our name only by your concession and Guido's; I have no name. Isaura's future will be fairer as Paolo de Cariano's wife."

There was no reproach in the quiet tones; no bitterness.

"I wish with all my heart that you and Guido might exchange places," said the count harshly. "I wish with all my heart that the bar sinister crossed his title instead of yours, and I could leave the name and honor of our house with you."

"*Signore!*" the startled Lelio exclaimed, involuntarily glancing toward the curtained arch, even while the implied compliment brought his color.

"It is the truth."

The listener in the alcove had lifted his brilliant dark eyes in a silent laughter quite free from resentment, a secure and insolent amusement in his regard as he contemplated the draperies across which he could not see and behind which he fancied himself unseen.

"What has Guido done, *signore?*" Lelio questioned, after watching for a moment.

"It is not what he has done, but what he may do," the father of both corrected. "For I have held that honor of ours above all things on earth, until now I grow old and must pass the charge on into hands unfit. A Baglioni was my wife, his mother; all the great vices of that great house are reproduced in him. Ambitious, unscrupulous, merciless in hate, fair in speech, and false in meaning—that is Guido del'Isoletto."

"*Signore, signore,* I have loved Guido all my life! You are too severe."

"Am I so? Look honestly in your memory; had he not always those traits?"

Lelio was silent, deeply troubled.

"I have recalled you from Spain to witness Isaura's wedding," the old man resumed, "for that. Not forgetting that you suffer, not because your presence will hush gossip, but because I need your help. While I live, I will keep our fame sweet and clear. Will you stand guard with me over it?"

"I will so stand with you, *signore.* But what menaces our fame?"

"If Paolo de Cariano dies at Guido's hands, while here to wed a daughter of our house, our disgrace is fixed. The old enmity between the duke and me is well known."

"You mean by a duel?"

"No," was the cold reply.

Lelio rose abruptly and moved a few paces down the room, almost as if to disclose or warn the occupant of the alcove. But after all he returned to his seat without changing the situation. The faint ring of silver spurs accompanied his movement, rhythmically corroborating the gray signature of the roads, traced in dust upon the dark velvet of his riding suit, and asserting his recent arrival.

"Why should you suspect such a thing, *signore?*" he urged. "Guido is no aimless hothead to risk his own good repute for the satisfaction of a half-forgotten feud. Why should he wish for the death of Don Paolo? Surely," he hesitated, "surely *he* did not love Isaura——"

The count's laugh was not pleasant.

"Love, love! No; we are speaking of Guido del'Isoletto, who loves no one. Don Paolo is in his way. How—I leave you to find out. I myself scarcely understand."

There was a pause, and in its hush became heard the murmur and rumor pervading the huge villa castle; a sound fusing a hundred different joyous echoes. Voices faintly audible, many hurrying feet, the tinkle of pottery and crystal, filled Casa Isoletto as the wedding festivities were prepared.

"I am very tired," Lelio at last re-

joined. "I have just arrived, as you are aware, *signore*, and have seen no one except you. These affairs are new to me. But you know I will keep the guard of honor by your side; holding my life or any other man's as a small matter in it."

"Even Guido's?"

"*Signore*, he is my brother!"

"He is my son."

The relentless justice, the unswerving purpose of the old noble's tone savored of a fanaticism of chivalry, of a stern devotion to an idea amounting to a religion. Bred in the same school, Lelio bent his head before it.

"Even Guido's," he submitted unsteadily. "But that will never be necessary."

"Embrace me, Lelio," the count demanded. "Then go rest. Isaura is a fool—she might have had you."

"The girl rose and fled into her room."

Lelio answered nothing; he was looking across the room as he mechanically stooped to the embrace.

The gentleman beyond the curtains had risen to his feet and was moving with leisure toward a balcony from which a narrow flight of steps led to the garden below. A grated door closed the entrance; he unlocked it with a small gilt master key, the act performed with the noiseless grace of all his actions. On the threshold he turned back to glance once more at his own portrait upon the wall. Raising his white, sparkling hand in playful mockery of the figure, he held an imaginary dice cup poised aloft, his black eyes mirthful and his dark face gleaming, then made the fancied cast with a supple turn of his wrist. "One throw," he nodded at the frescoed player; the words not spoken, yet plain enough to the one who watched.

And he passed out, locking the grille behind him.

The garden was very lovely in the noonday repose when Lelio entered it by the main approach, in pursuit of a scarlet-clad figure, who had arrived by a shorter route. Beds of purple Florentine lilies wavered in the sunlight, butterflies darted airily back and forth, the murmur of a fountain sounded from the central lawn. Here the turmoil and excitement of the villa had not reached. A gardener, powdered with the golden pollen of the flowering bushes he pruned, crawled out to salute the gentleman who passed.

"Don Guido went this way?" was the inquiry.

"*Illustrissimo,* toward the sundial."

Lelio turned across the lawn.

Approaching from the north, a clump of cypress trees shaded the sundial from view of the villa windows and the rest of the garden. Lelio was very close before he saw those before him; a small, childishly pretty young girl seated upon a low marble bench, her dark head bowed on her hands, and opposite her the nonchalant eavesdropper of the alcove.

If Lelio stopped short and leaned against the tree-trunk nearest him, it was not because he desired to play listener in his turn. For the moment he saw only the girl who was to have been his wife, and the pain was keen.

"*Isaura degli occhi azzurri,*" quoted Guido del'Isoletto, standing erect and smiling before the drooping figure of his cousin. "Isaura of the blue eyes, weeping on her wedding day. I wonder why."

The slow, stinging voice brought her head up, and from under dark brows and lashes her blue eyes flashed through their tears.

"Guido, not that, please do not call me that!" she pleaded. "Lelio is home, they told me."

"Why, yes, he is home since an hour. If you cannot bear to hear his old love name for you on my lips, how are you going to face him in person, I wonder?"

"I do not know," she confessed helplessly and hopelessly, and hid her eyes again.

Guido sat down in a garden chair opposite.

"Why are you afraid of him, cousin?" he asked with curiosity. "He has released you and consented to your marriage with Don Paolo."

Lelio moved, but was halted by her answer:

"I am so sorry to grieve him. And, and, if he should blame Don Paolo; quarrel with him——" The tears came afresh.

"Then, since Lelio was a matchless swordsman when he was home, and has added to that perfection a year of life in Spain, your petted Don Paolo would suffer. Very true. Also I remember that Paolo once bitterly insulted him, on the theme of our relationship. 'You are too young to punish, *cavaliere,*' said Lelio only, who himself was five years the older. But he was finely angry, nevertheless."

Isaura shuddered and shrank away from him.

"Finely angry," he repeated meditatively. "I would like to know just what Lelio angry is like to-day."

She lifted her head to look at him; her red, infantile mouth quivering and her soft eyes wet and terrified.

"Guido, you will not provoke Lelio to fight Don Paolo—Guido, you cannot be so cruel! Oh, what is this to you? If Lelio forgives us, cannot you?"

This time Lelio came forward, but heard the reply given before his presence was evident.

"I have my concern in this, cousin; for one thing, I am fond of Lelio. And if I might forgive you for ceasing to love him, I never could for loving Paolo de Cariano——" He paused, checked by Isaura's sudden change of expression, and, turning, saw who stood behind. "You, *caro!*" he exclaimed, and rose with open arms of Southern welcome.

To one so bruised as Lelio, so deeply and recently wounded in pride and affection, the declaration and greeting were a cordial whose warmth melted away all the giver's faults.

"It is good to meet you, Guido," he responded simply.

They remained looking at each other, with hands upon one another's shoulders. Seen together, Lelio was the taller; fair of tint, indefinably Northern in bearing and glance, with a stateliness at least equaling his powerful younger brother's imperious haughtiness of manner.

"You are the handsomest creature in Belfiore, man or woman," ejaculated Guido, after that brief scrutiny. "*Dio,* what a mad world, *caro!*"

His brows contracting, Lelio freed himself

"I will not think you are mocking me," he answered. "Let me salute our cousin now."

Guido glanced back at the girl, who had risen to stand by the sundial, and shrugged his shoulders. But, with a delicacy real or feigned, he moved a few paces away to leave the meeting unwitnessed, fixing his attention on a bed of lilies near by.

Lelio crossed to the pale and downcast Isaura.

"Have you no greeting for me, my cousin?" he asked, never more gently.

She looked up quickly, to encounter the steadfast clearness of his gray eyes, then clasped her hands above her heart, and so remained, gazing at him. She saw the pallor of sorrow and fatigue, the signs of hard travel, the firm endurance of the curved lip that would not bend to bitterness; she saw and translated the too-perfect composure.

"Are you afraid of me, Isaura?" he asked again.

"I had forgotten how kind your eyes were," she whispered, and the tears slipped over her face.

"Why should they not be kind—to you?" he inquired with his charming smile. "What grim monster did you fancy Spain had made of me? Are you in tears, to-day? Don Paolo will wish me back in Seville."

He spoke the name of his successful rival without an alteration of tone, quietly and naturally. The scarlet mounted to Isaura's forehead as she caught her breath, but the restraint was broken.

"I am a wicked girl," she declared passionately. "Lelio, Lelio, I have grieved and struggled against this—— I never meant to break my word. Indeed, I only meant to bid Don Paolo farewell that night. But the count discovered us and said he would tell you; so that my secret was no longer mine to keep. And I loved Paolo——"

"Hush, hush," Lelio urged, himself shaken. "Say no more, cousin. Did we not say all in our letters? I understand, and I have come to your wedding; is it not enough?"

"You forgive us, Lelio?"

"I never was angry with you, but glad the truth was known in time. Shall we go back to the villa? They were seeking you as I came through."

She took a step nearer, disregarding his question.

"The count is angry, Guido is angry, and *you* are not! Oh, you will not fight Don Paolo, say you will not."

"I will not," he stated.

The promise was full and definite. Guido moved slightly, but gave no other evidence of having heard. Isaura turned back to the bench and sat down, covering her face.

"I am very grateful," she answered. "Pray you go in without me, you and Guido; I will follow when this is past."

An instant later Lelio slipped his hand through Guido's arm, and they walked on. Neither spoke; Lelio gravely abstracted, the other keenly observant of him.

But on the summit of a little hill Guido suddenly halted his companion.

"Stand here, *caro*," he suggested. "You have been long away from home; linger here and look down at the province and city of Belfiore as they unfold beneath our villa. Is it not a fair domain that Don Paolo will rule when the duke, his grandfather, dies? Our practical sovereign he will be."

Lelio's eyes swept the scene; resting on the city of snowy buildings constructed of marble from its own quarries, the glittering panorama relieved here and there by dull gray stone cathedrals whose towers rose slim and fine into the deep azure above. It was a city of pearl, strung on the blue chain of the river that wound and twisted through its core; and set in the mosaic beauty of a glowing countryside.

"Its fairness is marred for me," he replied wearily. "Unless the count needs me further, after this festival is over I shall go back to Seville."

Guido leaned a little closer.

"And leave me! No, no; you are too sensitive, Lelio. Whatever I have you will share with me, and we will live side by side. My fortunes are your fortunes; are we not brothers? Tell me, are you so fond of Paolo de Cari-

He paused, and, turning, saw who stood behind.

ano that you can willingly yield all to him, as you have just done?"

"No," was the cold retort. "Have I not borne insult from him in his boyhood, arrogance from him at all times, until now he inflicts the final injury? The very letter he wrote, begging me to release Isaura, showed conscious superiority through its courtesy and deference of phrase. I have no cause to love him. But since he forms alliance with our house, as one of our house I bear myself toward him."

"Of our house he is not yet," said Guido, bending his head to hide his too-evident satisfaction.

"He will be so to-night."

"If he lives. Fancy if he were not to live, my Lelio. How gladly Isaura would take refuge with you; and be

content enough, after all, as your wife. How gladly that white city down there would hail relief from the Cariano rule and choose a duke from one of the other great families of Italy, such as ours. What a picture!"

Lelio's expression darkened in trouble.

"A picture not good to draw," he commented. "A picture for which you must dip your brush in dishonor and crime."

"What is crime?" Guido questioned dryly. "Last week when Don Paolo went hunting, he led a troop of seventy-five riders through the new grain and so ruined a dozen men in his hour's sport. I would make as good a master as that, for all our father's distrust of me."

"Guido," said Lelio, "you were in the frescoed alcove while I was with the count. Let us be open; you came there to listen, I saw you and did not interfere because I would not betray you. You heard, then, what we said regarding our honor, and how that honor protects Don Paolo. I thought our father misjudged you—do not make me confess him right."

Guido lifted his black eyes, not confused or abashed, but brilliant with surprised laughter.

"What, you saw me, yet spoke so? *Grazie tanto;* now you heard a kinder phrase when you found me with Isaura! 'I am fond of Lelio,' I told her. And it was true; though I care for no one else in the world, as our father declared."

The reproach brought the response of Lelio's deep flush.

"Guido, Guido, you should know how I love you," he exclaimed. "How grateful I am for your love, you cannot even guess. If I said that I held our honor above your life and mine, I only said what I would expect you to say of me. Our fair fame is to be held above all else, though the hand that holds it drips blood."

"So serious! Have you forgotten how to play, in Spain? Come in, come; you are worn and tired, while I am teasing you from pure wilfulness." He threw a caressing arm about the other's shoulders. "Come in, and dress for Isaura's wedding."

Lelio winced and shrank from the approaching fact, in spite of self-control. Feeling his tremor, Guido's eyes glinted even while he ingenuously fronted his companion's doubting examination.

"Can I trust that you were playing?" Lelio asked earnestly. "Playing upon the count's fears and credulity as upon mine; as you used to play maliciously in our childhood?"

"Did you imagine that I was going to pass a stiletto through Don Paolo's heart to-night?" Guido inquired with composure. "Trust my sanity, at least. Of course, I was playing. But come in."

The tone was faultless, yet the reply failed to carry conviction. Very gravely Lelio allowed himself to be led up the terraced steps and into the gray villa. He wanted to be alone, to have a space for thought and self-recovery.

But even within, Guido did not release his hold.

"You are going to your room," he remarked, "and I to mine. Let us go through the long gallery."

The long gallery, with its rows of paintings, cases of curious weapons and cabinets of books, was always a place of cool shadows. Lelio looked around as they entered, with a returning pang of the old wistful rebellion at sight of the men of his house among whom his own portrait could never hang.

"I am tired, indeed," he said. "Will you let me leave you for a while, my Guido?"

"Presently," the other assented. "First, I have a whim to show you a dainty toy sent me from Venice." He withdrew his hand, crossed to an obscure corner cabinet, and unlocked the door with the gold master key he carried. "A toy useful to a Baglioni or a Médici—did not the count compare me to them?—but valueless to quiet Guido del'Isoletto. See."

He turned about, holding up to Lelio's view an exquisite goblet of tinted and silver-traced crystal. Rose-hued

splashes of color stained the white fingers grasping the stem, as the sun struck through the glass; over the cup Guido's face showed richly vivid and mirthful.

"A sure and delicate weapon, *caro* Lelio! One fills it with wine, nothing else, and he who drinks is thirsty no more. There is no suffering, no outcry; simply he goes his way, and a few hours later the swift, silent fever of the marshes seizes him. If I were to drink now, by midnight you and our father would be the only Isoletto. If you hated Don Paolo and loved Isaura, if you desired to rule Belfiore at my side, and make your name glitter throughout Italy; in brief, if you were not yourself, but any one of the gentlemen around us—what an opportunity were here! But we are sober citizens; see, I return my Venetian cup to its cabinet."

He moved to suit action to word, his glance of blended mockery and question lingering on his companion.

"Give me the goblet, Guido," commanded Lelio, with stern finality, and extended his hand in a gesture not to be denied.

Still smiling, Guido touched his lips to the bright rim before obeying.

"*Addio*, bubble of death and dreams," he apostrophized.

Lelio deliberately dropped the vase-like cup on the floor between them. There was a tinkling crash, a scattering of rainbow fragments over the marble pavement, and the destruction was complete.

"I shall try to believe you playing," he signified curtly. "But I give warning that I shall watch you. Not in enmity, but in guard of your honor."

Guido's laugh was untroubled and sincere.

"Lelio, Lelio, if I had not been playing, would I have brought out my Venetian goblet for you to destroy? Long life to Duke Paolo and Duchess Isaura! Let us go dress."

This time it was Lelio who obeyed a gesture, and they went out.

Lights, color, the movement of music and the dance; the kaleidoscopic brilliancy of the crowd of gorgeously attired men and women—so the wedding night found the villa. The gleam of jewels and jewel-bright glances crossed the perfumed air, the music of soft laughter tangled in the music of the viols; the joyousness of an Italian festival overlaid all serious thought. The Duke of Belfiore was in the house of the Conte del'Isoletto, and ancient feuds were forgotten.

Through the scene Lelio moved tranquilly; speaking to one guest or another, greeting friends unseen for months, or giving the florid compliments of the day to expectant ladies. Many regards of admiration or liking followed him; many a whisper of Isaura's former engagement, coupled with sarcastic comment upon her choice. But he saw none of it, watching one figure unceasingly.

Late in the evening, Guido came to his brother's side and laid an affectionate hand on his arm.

"I am weary of dancing, and I have something to tell you. Come with me, *caro*."

"You have not regretted—your Venetian goblet?" Lelio asked seriously, yet feverishly relieved to have the other within reach.

Guido laughed, threading their way across the crowded room.

"Regretted it? No. But suppose I had used it; would you have denounced me before this swarm of our friends and enemies? Would honor have required that?"

"Hardly. Our honor would rather have compelled me to silence; to keep the disgrace hidden at all cost."

"I agree. But the goblet is broken, so—— This way, upstairs."

"What has happened, Guido?"

"I am going to tell you; it is too public below."

His abrupt and eager manner was sufficiently unusual to hold anxiety sharply alert. When they finally stopped at the door of a small study, Lelio's attention was too wholly engrossed by speculation for him to do

other than mechanically comply with Guido's gesture to advance.

"Go you in, my Lelio, while I bring a taper from the candelabra here in the hall."

Very naturally Lelio stepped across the threshold into the dark interior. Guido's soft laugh rippled after him, there was a movement of panther-like quickness; and the heavy paneled door shut with a snap of falling bolts.

"Pardon, *caro,*" came a last echo, as the startled Lelio swung around, too late.

"Guido!" he cried savagely. "Guido!"

The distant note of viols and lute floated through an open window, with faint sounds and voices from the ballroom. But from the hall, nothing. This wing of the villa had been deserted even by the servants during the festivities. Guido's plans were well laid; even by calling or pounding, the prisoner could scarcely hope to attract notice of his plight. Wounded to the heart by the treachery and falsehood, Lelio leaned against the nearest wall and saw one more illusion fall from its high place to leave blank darkness where a star had been.

What would Guido do with the unwatched interval so gained? Slowly the question grew until its shadow blackened the dusky room. The Venetian goblet was broken; what subtler weapon would be used? Poison or steel? A secret assault or feigned accident? For Paolo de Cariano's death was intended, no doubt. Death was walking among the revelers down there; Death in the guise of a shining-eyed, smiling young noble, who moved from group to group with courtly speech or polished jest. Lelio passed a hand across his forehead, giddy and ill.

After a while he aroused himself and went to the window. A lonely angle of the garden lay beneath, dense masses of cypress and laurel bulking large in the gloom. The murmur of a little brook rose pleasantly on the cool air. Here, all peace; there—what? He called loudly, desperately.

The cathedrals in the city below struck eleven. After a time they struck twelve, and he knew the supper must be going on downstairs. With the last chime, Lelio suddenly stood erect at the window and stretched his hands across the dark.

"Let me buy," he cried vehemently, and unconsciously aloud. "You who rule—— Fate, God, let me buy! All my life to pay for an hour now—my pride, my hopes, my portion of happiness, given to save this name not mine. Let me stand between this house and to-night's disgrace. Life for honor, let me buy!"

His ringing voice broke the hush into strange echoes. Isaura's tender bride's face drifted before him as he sank to his knee, the count's strong gray visage grim with shame, Don Paolo's rigid features, and Guido's mocking eyes. He felt his force of will leap out in strength to snatch the demanded boon, his imperious grasp close on the wheel of circumstance——

The bolts creaked shrilly, a blinding beam of light shot across the blackness.

"Some one called?" wondered doubtful tones. "Some one cried out?"

Lelio started to his feet, and saw a servant upon the open threshold, taper in hand.

"Yes," he answered, still confused. "Yes, I."

The servant came forward, peering into the shadows.

"*Scusi, scusi, signore;* I was passing and heard a cry."

The freedom had been given.

"I called," explained Lelio, fully recovered. "A frolic locked me in, a mere game." He put some gold into the servant's hand, and passed out.

A surprised friend spoke to him as he sped down the stairs, but Lelio neither heard nor paused. Groups of astonished servants turned to stare after the hurrying figure of one they had supposed in the supper room, but he gave no heed.

Around the table animation had reached its height; jest and gay retort, daring compliment and sparkling rebuff flashed back and forth. Isaura, flushed and sapphire-eyed, was seated

by Don Paolo's side in a dazzled content that took no note of one cousin's absence. Lelio, halting an instant in the doorway, found in all the merry faces no evidence that his own vacant chair had been observed. No evidence, until his gaze encountered the sombre eyes of the count; who sat at the head of the table with the aged Duke of Belfiore at his right hand.

In that crossing of glances, there leaped a fiery shock of comprehension. Without speech, without gesture other than the slight lift of Lelio's head, father and son exchanged the knowledge of danger present. And at the same moment Guido turned in his place and saw the stately figure on the threshold.

Of the three, the offender acted first; rising with a grace so natural, so contagiously ardent and impulsive, that every face turned toward him.

"A belated guest!" he announced in his ringing tones. "Room and a cup for Don Lelio! You are in time for the toast, *caro*, that hangs on Don Paolo's lips. Come, for honor and courtesy."

Every one broke into laughter and applause, waving greetings to the belated arrival. Advancing a step, Lelio saw Don Paolo gratifiedly rise to give the toast and lift from a servant's offered salver a vase-like, rose-hued goblet of Venetian crystal.

Challenging, mocking, warning, Guido's black eyes met those of his brother; daring him to give the alarm and tear down fair fame forever, to save Paolo de Cariano at the cost of confessing an Isoletto's attempted crime. Tricked doubly, Lelio recognized now that the shattered goblet in the long gallery had been a harmless duplicate, and that twice Guido had played with him.

Poising the goblet in his fingers, the young bridegroom deliberated the form of the toast demanded; smiling down at Isaura, who smiled up at him. The tableau was charming, and the delighted guests waited for the name hovering in that lover's regard.

"*Signori*——" Don Paolo began.

Lelio was across the room and in the place awaiting him.

"A moment!" he interrupted steadily and clearly, catching up his own filled cup. "An innovation, Don Paolo; a custom I learned in Spain. The exchange!"

The pretty whim seized the fancy of all. A burst of approval, a tinkle of glass and silver, and each applauding guest exchanged his goblet for that of his opposite neighbor. Sincerely pleased, with the easy pleasure of the happy, Don Paolo accepted his late rival's cup and left in Lelio's grasp the Venetian goblet. Helpless and unable to interfere, Guido could only watch.

There fell a little hush as all settled back, looking to Lelio to give the toast he had assumed. Then the Duke of Belfiore spoke in his thin, keen old voice, for the first time in half an hour:

"A gracious thought, Don Lelio. But you failed to carry it out; you should have exchanged cups with the Lady Giacinta opposite you, not with Don Paolo."

Lelio, startled, looked at the veteran statesman and arch-plotter. Leaning forward, the duke returned the gaze; and in his grimly acute face Lelio read that the truth was half guessed. Exposure hung on a verge; to let fall the goblet now, to feign a slip, would be to give the final confirmation. And there was no time——

"I snatched the chance to pledge your kinsman and ours, your grace," Lelio answered, never more calmly. "The Lady Giacinta will pardon me." He lifted the tinted goblet, facing the clapping guests, and fixed upon Guido the luminous beauty and command of his gray eyes. "To the peace and honor of the house now also yours, Don Paolo," he said, and drank.

The toast was received hilariously. Don Paolo leaned across the table to offer his hand to the giver, the women tossed flowers and waved salutes. If Guido cried out, the sound was overwhelmed, and those answering eyes compelled him to silence. Lelio saw the suspicion fade out of the duke's expression, as he resumed his seat, and

knew the price had not been paid without the victory.

The supper went on joyously. Doubtless following Guido's instructions, the servant who had brought the Venetian goblet to Don Paolo presently came and removed it from the table, the incident passing unnoticed. Throughout all Lelio sat unflinchingly, playing his part evenly and tranquilly. But when they rose, he lingered by his father for a moment.

"Good night, *signore,*" he said, with infinite tenderness.

The count turned to him, but there was nothing to be read in that serene face, and he knew nothing of the goblet. They were not alone, yet he ventured a question:

"You suggested a guard, Lelio——"

"My guard is over, and successfully, *signore,*" he answered, and smiled before passing on.

Upon the wide marble stairs leading up from the hall, Guido overtook his brother, panting and sick with horror.

"Lelio!" he gasped. "Lelio!"

But Lelio quietly shook off the hand laid on his arm.

"No," he said, with the dignity of betrayed friendship. "Never again, Guido. Not because I am about to die, but because you deceived me, lied to me."

"Lelio——"

Lelio clasped his hands behind him, his breast heaving slightly under its satin and lace. The light from the candelabra glittered around his golden bronze head, and dwelt softly upon the cameo-like repose of his colorless face.

"I have not held much place in the world," he stated, "or much claim to its favor. But I have served this house as truly as any of its legitimate sons. I have bought your honor, and I am about to pay. Good; I am content."

"Why did you drink?" Guido flung savagely. "Oh, it was not fear or policy which held me mute; I would have struck that cup from your lips though all Belfiore fell—but I was too far away, too late. And now——"

"Now? Guido, will you promise me that my work shall stand; that you will not again attempt this?"

"If I do, will you forgive me your death? I tell you honestly I have no other regret in this matter, except the failure."

"I forgive that already. I offer more; I will forgive your deceit of me."

Guido looked at him, then turned half aside in fierce impotence and shame. His hands clinched in the tension, his dark brows knotted and tangled. Below in the hall people came and went in noisy gayety; many glancing up at the two brothers standing on the stairs, and nodding or smiling appreciation of the picture.

"I give you my promise that I will touch no man's life except fairly and openly," Guido said slowly. "I have my lesson, for I love you alone of all men or women, Lelio."

"Think of me no more; I have lived to some purpose, and ask no more," the other answered, without bitterness. "I have loved you very dearly, and do still."

There was a pause, for Guido had no voice.

"How long have I to wait?" Lelio asked, gravely meditative.

"Until early dawn."

"I would rather be alone. You must go back to the revel and play out the game. Good night, my Guido."

The memories evoked were too much. Guido raised his hand with a swift, supple movement that comprehended all a gambler's fatalism in its allusion.

"I have cast, and lost—yet played with loaded dice! Good night," he said hardly.

Before Lelio also rose the sunny alcove with its fresco portrait of the laughing dice player.

"Is it the *last* throw?" he demanded once more.

"Yes," answered Guido.

For an instant longer they regarded one another; then Lelio smiled with the old caressing warmth, and turning, went alone up the broad white stairs.